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AN AID IN THE SECURING OF RETURNS OF VITAL STATISTICS FROM PHYSICIANS.

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That the reliability of vital statistics in any community rests fundamentally upon the promptness, completeness, and accuracy of the reports submitted to the authorities by the physicians is axiomatic. Yet every health officer is painfully aware of the difficulties encountered in getting the doctors to do their part in a thoroughly satisfactory manner.

Upon assuming charge of the Health Department of the City of Richmond in July, 1906, I at once found that we were getting very incomplete returns. So far as certificates of death were concerned, there was no trouble, our ordinances prohibiting the interment or removal from the city of any dead body without a written permit from the Health Department, which permit is issued only on the presentation of a properly executed certificate of death. Returns of deaths were, therefore, complete, at least so far as their actual number was concerned.

In the matter of reporting births and contagious diseases, however, the utmost looseness prevailed, as shown by the fact that the average annual number of births reported during the preceding six years (since which time the ordinance had been in force) was only 685, which was at an annual rate of 7.97 per 1,000. The incompleteness of the returns of contagious diseases was fully evidenced by the enormous ratio which the deaths bore to the reported cases.

In casting about for the best means of correcting this state of affairs, the secret of success appeared to lie in convincing the doctors of the importance of the matter and then in making the reporting of all cases as easy as possible. This was deemed a far better course than endeavoring to correct the trouble by legal procedure. The cordial support of the entire medical profession of a community means everything to a health officer, and no great cordiality can prevail after a doctor has been subjected to the ignominy of appearing in police court before the usual gaping crowd, of being mulcted for even a few dollars of his hard-earned money, and of having his disgrace reported in the newspapers.

The two chief difficulties in the way of getting prompt and complete reports seemed to be ignorance on the part of physicians as to what contagious diseases they were required to report and the fact that they

could not always lay their hands readily on the special form required for making the report.

In order to get around these difficulties, a special outfit was gotten up and distributed to every doctor in Richmond at the end of December of last year. It consists of a pasteboard box, 8 by 10 by 3½ inches, covered with marble paper, and with a let-down front, admitting of easy access to its contents. On the front of this box the words "Board of Health" are printed in gold letters. The whole makes a rather ornamental, certainly not an objectionable, addition to the office equipment of the doctor.*

On the inside of the lid of this box is printed a "Condensed Schedule of the Duties Demanded of Physicians by City Ordinances," under which are stated, very briefly, the laws relating to the reporting of deaths and births, with the penalties for violation, and the law relating to the reporting of contagious diseases and recoveries therefrom, with the penalty for violation. A full list of the reportable diseases is given, printed in prominent black-face type. Finally, there is a direct appeal for co-operation, but this ends with the statement that "when convinced that any physician is systematically violating any ordinances above outlined, it will be necessary to bring such violation to the attention of the proper authorities, and see that the prescribed penalties are enforced."

This box contains a full supply of all forms needed in complying with the ordinances,—birth and death certificates and postal cards for reporting contagious diseases, tuberculosis, and recoveries from contagious diseases. A liberal supply of stamped return envelopes is also enclosed, for use especially in mailing birth certificates, but also for any other official business, the theory being that the doctor should not be put to a cent's expense for doing that which is for the benefit not of himself, but of the Health Department and the community. A final form consists of a special blank (postal card) to be used by the doctor in asking for a new supply of any other form. When this request is received at the office, there is always sent, along with the special forms for which he asked, another of these request forms. In this manner there is never any excuse for a doctor's running out of forms of any kind.

This device has worked admirably, and we are now getting very satisfactory returns. The improvement has not been due to this single factor, of course, since the other methods employed have contributed to that end. Numerous circular letters have been sent to the doctors, and a careful checking system of death certificates has been followed, where the cause of death was any one of the reportable diseases, and also where the decedent was under one year of age. Besides this the

*The boxes were made in Richmond and cost \$12.50 per hundred.

sanitary officers are instructed to get full information, when visiting a house for any purpose, as to all infants under one year of age living there. This information is followed up, and many previously unreported births have thus been gotten at, as well as the names of a number of midwives who had not registered with the Health Department as required by law. All these things have contributed to the securing of more complete returns, but it is believed that the outfit described has played an important part. Several other cities, New York among the number, have since adopted the idea.